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Media Literacy, Congratulations! Now, the Next Step

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Media Literacy Education has definitely come a long way. I remember mentioning Media Literacy at a Prix Jeunesse¹ presentation in New York City in the early-mid 1990s— all the participants looked at me as a weirdo and politely ignored my comment on the necessity for TV producers to include or at least reflect upon media literacy-related topics while writing TV programs. Things have changed. Today everybody talks about media literacy, and increasingly they will be talking about Media and Information Literacy, or News Literacy, or Educommunication, etc. Whatever we call it, we all basically know what we are talking about (I'll refrain from composing the list here). What is important is that “media literacy” is a globally (globally!) accepted term, a framework clear enough to have a discussion about it with representatives of many different professional areas of our communities. I think that this is the result of the thousands of educators who have been diligently educating (often with a touch of true activism) the mediamakers, the policymakers, and the public in general (teachers, parents, social workers, medical workers, etc.) for so many years. Congratulations! But, in reality, the main step is still pending: how many public school curricula do you know that clearly include media literacy in their programs? Not many, really. And when it is included, it is not mandatory (like math, or even gym), or it is confused with ICT literacy (how to use a computer, create a blog, tweet, photoshop yourself, etc.).

Meanwhile, around the world policies are being set up: we need media literate citizens. All member states of the European Union will need to report, by December of 2011, the level of media literacy of their citizenry². Part of this urge reflects the fact that the political powers no longer control the media sphere³; privatization of TV, satellites, the Internet and mobile telephony have radically changed the playing field. It is now clear to policymakers that in order to develop

informed, rational, participant citizens, they will need to be—at some level— media literate. If we want to develop participatory democratic political systems, then citizens will need to be able to separate opinion from information, propaganda from political commentary. It is then a moment to rejoice for media literacy advocates around the world: the political system is now demanding media literacy for and from their citizens. The call for media literacy is no longer the call from the disempowered middle school educator alone in her classroom, it is now policy. It would seem that the moment has finally arrived. There is an empathy of wills (civil society and political) towards developing media literacy; new initiatives are in motion, such as UNESCO's wide-vision and well researched “Media and Information Literacy Curriculum for Teachers”⁴; a new global University network, UAC-MILID, has just been created⁵; there are Media Literacy initiatives in Nigeria, India, Peru, Saudi Arabia, the Philippines, all over the world. Congratulations!

At the same time, again, very few of these initiatives have actually arrived to our schoolrooms, to our formal educational settings. Arts programs, and humanities programs in general, are being cut out of the curricula of public education around the globe; stressing the need for writing, reading and numeracy is actually the norm (understandable giving the failing rates in educational standards of most industrial countries). There is no room (or time!) for another item. Most people would say the kids know how to use the computer anyway, they learn fast; why do they need media literacy in school? This is similar to the 1980s and 90s argument about incorporating television into the educational setting: why show TV in the classroom when all what kids do at home is to watch TV? This argument, of course, is missing the point entirely: it was not about watching more TV, but about reflecting on what they were actually watching, and when lucky (and equipment was ac-

cessible) to in fact make some TV (write a script, read the script, learn the techniques of audio-visual story telling, understand TV distribution) as part of the class curriculum.

So what we need now is the next step, to actually bring Media Literacy to all schools, starting from Kindergarten on.⁶ High school might be too late already, especially when we learn that what you see on your Internet searches is mostly a reflection of yourself.⁷ The High School student might end up basically seeing variations of her childhood choices of cereal, cartoons and toys, nicely packed up by the TV/Internet programs she used to enjoy when she was 3.

End Notes

¹ As per their website, the bi-annual TV festival Prix Jeunesse International awards the world's best children's and youth TV programmes. See: <http://www.prixjeunesse.de>

² Directive 2010/13/EU of the European Parliament, Article 33: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2010:095:0001:0024:EN:PDF>

³ Or if they do, it is in the form of clear censorship. Many examples, from turning off the Internet in Egypt a few months ago to... you choose.

⁴ See: <http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/publications/Media%20and%20information%20literacy%20curriculum%20for%20teachers.pdf>

⁵ UNESCO-UNITWIN-UNAOC University Network on Media and Information Literacy and Intercultural Dialogue. See: <http://www.unaoc.org/communities/academia/uac-milid>

⁶ According to a Nielsen study, 2-5 year old Americans watch 25 hours of TV weekly, 4.5 hours of DVD or video games + 90 minutes on DVR and 45 minutes with a VCR: http://www.mediapost.com/publications/?fa=Articles.showArticle&art_id=118972S

⁷ See Eli Pariser's TED Talk: <http://blog.ted.com/2011/05/04/twitter-presents-great-taglines-for-eli-parisers-talk/>